



### IRAN'S COVID-19 VACCINE: HOPE AMID CONTROVERSY

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



In December 2020, Iran announced that it has made not one but two home-grown COVID-19 vaccines. <sup>1</sup>Iran's efforts to find a preventive treatment for the pandemic that has rattled the world have come in the face of harsh US sanctions and astounding number of people affected by the Coronavirus due to the initial governmental denial and inertia in implementing restrictive measures to prevent its transmission. In October 2020, Iran reported a record 4,151 new Coronavirus cases in one day as the worst-hit country in the region by the pandemic. <sup>2</sup>

#### From the Epicentre of Infection to the 'Hub of Vaccine Production'?

On December 29, 2020, Iran started the human trials of its locally manufactured COVID-19 vaccine, COVIranBarekat. <sup>3</sup> The vaccine has been produced by Shifa Pharmed which is a pharmaceutical company part of a state-owned conglomerate named Setad. Owing to the unilateral imposition of sanctions against Iran by United States, it has been difficult for the former to import sufficient vaccines to meet requirements at home. COVIranBarekat is the first of eight Iranian vaccines under trials that are expected to be completed by end of February this year. The second native vaccine that

<sup>1</sup> Maziar Motemadi, "Iran to start human trials on second local COVID vaccine", *Al Jazeera*, February 7, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/7/iran-to-start-human-trials-on-second-local-covid-vaccine>

<sup>2</sup> News Desk, "'Catastrophic': Iran reports record rise in COVID-19 cases", *Al Jazeera*, October 6, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/6/catastrophic-iran-reports-record-rise-in-covid-19-cases>

<sup>3</sup> Maziar Motemadi, "COVIranBarekat: Iran launches human trials of its COVID vaccine", *Al Jazeera*, December 29, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/29/iran-covid-vaccine-trials-start>

has also entered the human trial phase in Iran is named, COV Pars manufactured by the Razi Vaccine and Serum Research Institute.<sup>4</sup> Iranian Health Minister, Saeed Namaki said that due to these promising vaccines lined up for trials, the country could become a 'hub of vaccine production' in the near future.<sup>5</sup>

Vaccine 'hub' or not, Iran has most certainly come a long way from being the epicentre of infection in the entire region to a country where home-grown medical companies are now producing vaccines. COV Pars vaccine can be both inhaled and injected stimulating the immune system and can be manipulated to work against multiple viral mutations.<sup>6</sup> The Iranian state has announced that it aims to inoculate 70% of its population by the end of the Iranian Year on March 20, 2021 while these internally produced vaccines are free of cost for the Iranian public.<sup>7</sup>

All this is happening despite harsh US sanctions that have even hindered the country's access to international vaccines that are available even during the full onslaught of the pandemic, acquiring essential medical supplies had been an uphill task. Iranian public has borne the brunt of the pandemic for the past year while also having to deal with former President Trump's 'maximum pressure' campaign that blocked their access to essential goods for sustenance. Iranian government had refused to succumb to any pressure exerted by the previous US administration to renegotiate the 2015 landmark Iran nuclear deal. Iran had also begun violating the nuclear enrichment terms of this multilateral agreement after the US unilaterally abandoned the pact despite urgings from the international community.

### Iran's Vaccine Problem and Geopolitics

Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has announced a ban on vaccines produced in the West forbidding their use in the country. Communicating his mistrust toward UK and US in particular, Ayatollah Khamenei said in a televised speech, "I really don't trust them. Sometimes they want to test their vaccines on other countries. I am not optimistic (about) France either."<sup>8</sup> However, Russia's Sputnik V vaccine has already been used to immunize frontline medical staff in Iran

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<sup>4</sup> Syed Zafar Mehdi, "Iran unveils second homegrown COVID-19 vaccine", *Anadolu Agency*, February 7, 2021. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/latest-on-coronavirus-outbreak/iran-unveils-second-homegrown-covid-19-vaccine/2136654>

<sup>5</sup> AresuEqbali and Sune Engel Rasmussen, "Iran Begins Covid-19 Vaccination Campaign", *WSJ*, February 9, 2021. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-begins-covid-19-vaccination-campaign-11612892912>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Iran State Media, "Iran to become major regional hub of manufacturing COVID-19 vaccines: Health minister", *IRNA*, February 11, 2021. <https://en.irna.ir/news/84225978/Iran-to-become-major-regional-hub-of-manufacturing-COVID-19-vaccines>

<sup>8</sup> News Desk, "'I don't trust them': Ayatollah Ali Khamenei bans import of Pfizer, AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccines in Iran", *First Post*, January 8, 2021. <https://www.firstpost.com/world/i-dont-trust-them-ayatollah-ali-khamenei-bans-import-of-pfizer-astrazeneca-covid-19-vaccines-in-iran-9184531.html>

exhibiting the Islamic Republic's strategic alignment with the former against the United States and its European allies.

The decision to ban Western vaccines has also attracted criticism from within Iran. For example, Iran's Medical Council called the choice of Russian vaccine, "unjustifiable and risky" calling on the government to buy the world's "best vaccines."<sup>9</sup> Such statements have also surfaced all over social media where people from within Iran and all over the world have blamed the Iranian authorities of putting politics over health by banning Western vaccines. Regardless of the controversy surrounding Iran's overall response toward the COVID-19 destruction that has targeted the country, Iran can still access western vaccines like Pfizer and AstraZeneca through WHO's Covax program.<sup>10</sup>

The Islamic Republic's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been mired in controversy and politics from the very beginning of the outbreak. Trump administration had continued its pressure campaign of imposing harsh sanctions against the country throughout the onslaught of the pandemic, making it even harder for an already compromised state to mount an appropriate response to this disease. However, in face of such adversity, Iran's indigenous vaccine projects are admirable as they reflect the government's seriousness (albeit late) in responding to this health emergency. While there are voices that are wary of the Iranian vaccine's efficacy and quality in comparison with the Western vaccines however, at this stage, the country's investment at creating its own vaccines is commendable. As far as the question of a reliable vaccine is concerned, we are yet to witness an effective vaccine without side-effects even from countries where substantive funds are devoted to research and development.

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<sup>9</sup> NajmehBozorgmehr, "Iran's vaccination drive becomes ensnared in geopolitics", *The Financial Tribune*, February 11, 2021. <https://www.ft.com/content/696331a9-b027-4fb3-afd9-04c6aa30bb0c>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.